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Footnotes: Curated Resources for Ministers

Harding School of Theology

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## Footnotes: Challenges in Education

Bob Turner

*Harding School of Theology*

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# Footnotes<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Curated Resources for Ministers



**July 10, 2020**

Hey Friends,

I spent a few weeks in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York for our summer vacation. Lots of walks, drive thru meals, and walks. It also gave me some time to catch up on books, including Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*. Whoa. Pretty strange. I read it while in Ohio's Amish Country and her childhood made

the Amish look practically mainstream. In it, Westover works her way out of her traumatic fundamentalist background. The principal architect of her trauma was her dad (one of those guys who begins every other sentence with, *I know it's not politically correct to say, but...*). He shelters the kids from schools and books because schools are socialist factories that corrupt young minds and books are the publication arm of that system.

Her work made me think about the nature of education and how we work through our stuff, learn from our past, embrace what our parents gave us, and get rid of the rest. Some of our best lessons come when our minds are most impressionable. But so do some of the worst. Westover's story made me also reflect on the place of education in our society and in our churches. I'll talk a bit in this issue about the form of education I know best, which is Christian higher education, and make a few comments on where we can feel good and where we might do better.

Also:

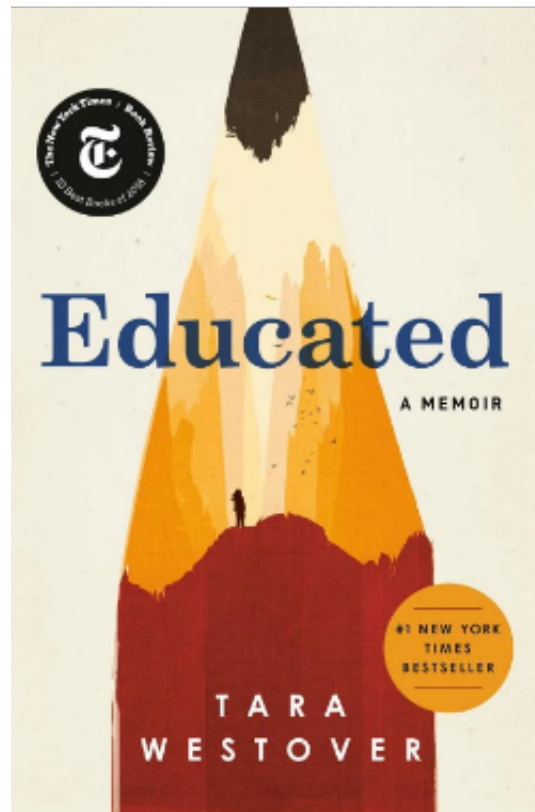
- Resources on the Sermon on the Mount
- A Few More Footnotes.



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## **Educated** by Tara Westover

Sometimes you read one that you struggle to put down. Enter Tara Westover's debut story that details her upbringing in conservative Mormonism. Every 11-12 pages you lift up your eyes, shake your head, and then return your eyes back to the page to make sure you read what you think you read.



Westover grew up with an overbearing father who mixed fundamentalist Mormonism with anti-establishment Americanism and a morality that makes the dad from *Footloose* look like Mick Jagger. Beyond the fundamentalism, she also endured abuse from her brother, a lack of trust from her mother, and come-and-go support from siblings. Any other support system was unavailable because her parents refused to send her to school, allow her to see doctors, or participate in most other things that were of the world---which her dad testified was in its final days. He spent his days working, reading from the Old Testament prophecies, and holding the family hostage for his spontaneous sermons on biblical prophecy, the end times, America's founding, the problems of socialism, the people who embrace socialism, and the problems with associating with the people who embrace socialism. I felt deep sympathy for her throughout the book, but admit that I'd love for her dad to get his own reality show.

The book hits its mark not only because of the depravity of Westover's experience but also because of her ensuing progress. She goes to college at BYU and then ultimately does a PhD at Cambridge. Not bad for someone who made it to college without ever hearing of the Holocaust. [Probably for the best, there

is no telling how her dad would've spun that one].

Like many memoirs, it has problems regarding the veracity of some claims. We only get one side. One person's perspective is rarely enough to appreciate the full truth. Or, as Aaron Burr would remind us, "No one else was in the room where it happened." Even if her stories are only half-true, that 50% is so wild that it easily counts as otherworldly dysfunction. Further, her experiences aren't simply details of her perception and how she interpreted particular events (like memoirists who say "my parents were too strict" as if there is universal measurement). After Westover's brother intimidates her by forcing her head into the toilet bowl we can know we've moved well past feelings and perceptions.

The story informs how we understand our own religious, philosophical, and educational metamorphosis. [One reviewer lightly compared](#) it to J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*. The difference is, of course, that many Americans come from places like Vance's Middletown, Ohio, while only a really short list can empathize with Westover.

The book offers readers a chance to look back at their own story and what they heard from parents, teachers, churches, and friends. What did we hear? What did we miss? What was overemphasized? What assumptions did we acquire?



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## REPORT CARD: Christian Higher Education

I work for a Christian college, so I'm interested in the challenges that face institutions of higher learning, particularly the Christian ones. Here's my report card of where we are in Christian higher education. I'm thinking particularly here of my own group in Churches of Christ, but you might find overlap with your communities.

**Covid-19** **Pass.** Nobody knows the future on this one. Declines in on-campus attendance might bump online programs. Residential colleges thrive on the

opposite of social distancing (students are strongly required to attend things called mixers). Administrators are right to worry about the financial circumstances of students, families, and donors. Every administrator deserves some serious grace for how they handle this one.

**Online Classes as Christian Education.** **Pass.** Campus culture is a feature of some schools and a detriment to others. Most Christian schools boast intimacy, community, and spiritual formation. But in an online environment? The jury is out. I think schools can figure this one out, but they need to hurry.

**Academic Diversity.** **Fail.** Many Christian colleges have an ideal of a middle-of-the-road target audience who isn't too crazy on either side of their ideological spectrum. Like in American politics, that group can be tough to find. What's the answer? Spend more time teaching *how* to think and less time teaching *what* to think. Focus more on how to be smart and respectful and less on lampooning enemies. This begins with an ideologically diverse faculty, broad library collections, and making sure that great thinkers can ascend to positions of campus leadership. It requires viewing university employees as unique pieces in a mosaic rather than types that we wish we could clone.

**Cultural Diversity.** **Fail.** Most of us can do better here. Every college has its own demographics. But even if student populations at Christian colleges are representative of the larger culture, I know of few, if any, with a staff and faculty that mirrors the broader demographics. All schools who want better representation are going to need to commit to a better way of doing things. The multiculturalism and colorblindness of past generations should be exchanged for a sincere commitment to racial, ethnic, and economic justice.

**Worthy Investment?** **Pass** The question is not whether going to college is worth the investment. **Yes, it is.** We might quibble with what we mean we say "go to college." Does that mean taking classes to get a diploma at the nearest school? Or does it mean ponying up for the all-inclusive four-year residency at the leafy, elite campus of your choice? That's another matter. Exclusive colleges might not be all they are cracked up to be. **Only 46 schools in the U.S. reject more than 80% of applicants**, meaning most campuses aren't even very

selective. College is worth it. But *some* aren't worth their expense. And [watching mom go to prison](#) because she tried to shoehorn you into one of those definitely isn't worth it.

**Cost. Pass.** Schools work harder on keeping costs low than they are given credit for. The cost of providing an education in 2020 is substantial. We just watched schools pivot from brick and mortar to an online experience--through learning management systems (like Canvas or Blackboard), streaming platforms like Zoom, and pricey digital library databases. For every water slide built to attract college football recruits there are 1,000 college professors and librarians figuring out how to reuse conference lanyards and type on the back of old stationery. Outside of the Ivies and public ivies, not a lot of people are getting rich on college campuses. Except the Head Football Coach. But let's move on.

**Debt. Fail.** Hopefully students and parents will think twice before amassing six-figure student debt to finance a degree. I've watched this hurt graduate schools, too, as students cannot afford to train for ministry right out of college because of the amount of debt they carry. There is only so much schools can do here, but we've taken a posture at HST where we strongly discourage students from enrolling if they have too much debt. Schools that don't have this conversation are doing an injustice to their students and their society.

**STEM and Liberal Arts. Pass.** George Anders's book [You Can Do Anything](#) makes the case for the "useless" liberal arts education. Most small, private schools have made a living in the liberal arts. STEM is another matter. Christian schools will be smart if they continue to emphasize that college is a time to learn, grow, and engage in critical thinking, rather than eight semesters of onboarding for that entry-level job. It will be tempting to ditch the liberal arts. I'd go the other way and emphasize them.

**Population Decline of Churches. Fail.** I've discussed this in previous issues. The numbers aren't pretty. We're dishing out slices from the same pie and the pie is shrinking. Even for schools whose campus population is not as tied to one ecclesial tradition, the larger declines in church membership should be troubling. Which leads me to my final point....



**Relationship Between Congregations and Colleges. Fail.** This one worries me a bit. Okay, a lot. I really wish colleges were more affirming of the work done in congregations and the successes of the ministers in those churches. There seems to be a fair amount of suspicion on both sides. Recently Spencer MacCuish, President of Eternity Bible College, joined [Preston Sprinkle on Theology in the Raw](#) to talk about this problem, where colleges began viewing churches as entities that sent them money and students---rather than honoring the original arrangement, which is that the schools existed to serve the churches. My oversimplified solution: churches should stop saying negative things about Christian colleges and Christian colleges should start saying really nice things about churches.




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## Preaching the Sermon on the Mount

I'm preaching through the Sermon on the Mount at White Station right now. Our Iglesia de Cristo minister Juan Meza and I have split the Sundays so far. And we're asking members to watch Marie Kondo's [Tidying Up](#) to think about getting our houses in line. Besides Marie, here are some resources I've used.

**Randy Harris, *Living Jesus* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2012).** You can hear his voice on every page. More like a collection of sermons than a commentary. I bet you can't read it and not start stealing his material.

**Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew, Brazos Theological* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015).** He is a philosopher/theologian, not necessarily a biblical studies scholar. This is the best thing about this commentary series, as they pulled in diverse scholars and let them do their thing. The great historian Jaroslav Pelikan wrote on Acts and systematic theologian Francesca Murphy wrote on 1 Samuel.

**Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).** Really incredible. Best part from



a librarian's perspective: this is one of those books that was originally released through an elite European publisher for a costly sum. Two years later, our friends in Michigan picked it up and sold it here for much cheaper. I'm all for European presses doing their thing for niche research, but love this arrangement repackaging the titles that seem to have a wider audience. Good work. It's parmigiano-reggiano at Kraft Singles prices.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017). My favorite. He manages to be both detailed and practical.



## A Few More Footnotes

1. Chad Sanders asks white friends to [stop sending 'Love' texts](#).
2. Speaking of one of our newspapers of record, the NYT had some trouble recently after running Tom Cotton's op-ed [supporting a military response](#) to protests/looting. The editor of that page, [James Bennet resigned](#) after an outcry from the newsroom (and likely part of the readership) that the Times printed Cotton's piece. At first I found it troubling, as the newsroom seemed to value the *ed* over the *op*. It seemed odd that someone could read a piece, sign off on it, print it, and then turn around the next day and apologize for it. I guess I assumed that Bennet had actually read the piece, which appears not to be the case. I really wish he had, so we could have a really fun argument about the paper's role in hosting vigorous arguments on many sides of a contested issue. But we can't, since his departure now looks a bit more like mere incompetence.
3. Sara Barton on ["A Grief Deferred."](#)
4. Edward Robinson is the foremost historian on African American Churches of Christ. [The Christian Chronicle interviewed him](#) about his new book [that is also reviewed here](#).
5. Major book release by some friends ([Discipleship in Community](#)). More on this in the next issue.



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**UPCOMING**

**July 27**

Discipleship in  
Community

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